

home

Have we done our

work

From year 3 onwards, most Australian schoolchildren are set what can seem like a huge amount of homework.

But are all those assignments really beneficial for the kids, let alone for the parents who are actually doing them?

Mark Dapin investigates.

Evidence.

ALL OVER AUSTRALIA, EVERY NIGHT of the week, tired, anxious essayists are adding the finishing touches to projects about the fathers of Federation, or Aboriginal Dreamtime stories.

Crouched over dining-room tables, with the sturm und drang of prime-time television booming in the background, they struggle to manufacture an interest in the life and times of Sir James Dickson. At bedside desks, they scour the internet for the correct spelling of Ngalyod, the rainbow serpent.

They have little time left for their families, or for sport or music. They are focused on achieving, on passing examinations, on not being left behind.

They are called "parents".

Adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg is the agony uncle for *Girlfriend* magazine and a new bimonthly called *Explode*, aimed at *Girlfriend* readers' would-be boyfriends. In his avuncular capacity, he recently completed an internet survey of 1178 primary schoolchildren. He found 71 per cent of them thought they were given too much homework, 57 per cent did not believe their teachers read it when they handed it in, 20 per cent said they routinely

copied and pasted their homework from the internet, and 22 per cent said they got their mum and dad to do it for them.

"So, in fact, here's the joke," says Carr-Gregg. "Most of the primary schools in Australia are setting homework for the parents, not for the kids."

In 2004, Carr-Gregg addressed a conference of the Junior School Heads' Association of Australia, suggesting conventional homework be scrapped from prep to year 9.

"Almost everyone came up to me afterwards and said, 'Look, we agree with you,'" he says. "You're absolutely right about homework. Could you just tell the parents?"

It is the parents who are demanding homework be set, and those same parents who are actually completing the assignments.

In those households where the children do the work themselves, says Carr-Gregg, the load for even primary schoolchildren can reach up to two hours a night.

"Many, many parents – and particularly those who send their kids to private primary schools – actually believe the barometer of whether the school's doing a good job is the amount of homework they set," he says.

"It's stupid because, if you look at the

literature, there's absolutely no academic benefit whatsoever. All it has done is hijacked home life. It's not the educationalists who are against the idea of reducing homework – I mean, they *really* want to do the marking late at night – but you've got a clear group of parents who, I think, view homework as a babysitter. It keeps the kids quiet and they don't have to interact with them. And what does that say?"

In NSW, the Department of Education and Training's homework policy says some formal homework usually begins in NSW schools as early as years 1 and 2, and can be set all across the curriculum by year 3. By year 7, students should be completing homework "on a regular basis in most subjects". It recommends parents help their children by setting aside time "each day" for homework, provide them with somewhere to study "if possible", and sign completed work if requested.

Melbourne-based Carr-Gregg is a Sydney Grammar old boy. He grew up in the 1960s, doing "a lot" of homework, but he believes the average child's workload has tripled since then, at a time when they are expected to take part in more structured after-school activities, from playing soccer to playing



the violin. "That's why you've got so many kids feeling anxious, stressed and depressed," he says, "and why I've got an eight-week waiting list in this clinic. You get kids crying, tearful, hysterical. I've seen [depression] in 10-year-olds."

THE IDEA THAT MUCH OF THE HOMEWORK currently set in schools is essentially pointless is winning increasing support. Many educationalists have begun to question the load – and the content of the load – we put on early teenage children.

Liberal theorists often argue the time spent completing set exercises could be better used reading out loud, playing board games with mum, or walking the dog with dad. Some, such as educational consultant and former high-school principal Ian Lillico, have suggested homework should involve housework, and children might be assessed, for instance, on their washing-up skills.

Conservative thinkers, such as Liberal Party stalwart Dr Kevin Donnelly, who runs the consulting firm Education Strategies, argue that children need to learn the basics by rote, and to learn them early, or they will never learn them. They believe there is time to play

Scrabble as well as memorise the names of every prime minister from Barton to Howard, and that any let-up is simply pandering to fashionable concerns about children's "self-esteem", a concept that did not exist in the good old days of Latin, Greek and 200 lines for talking in class.

Lillico, explaining the need for his rather different approach, calls it "really disgusting" that – according to his own research – the average time spent communicating between father and adolescent son is eight seconds a day.

"Half of that's grunting, anyway," says Lillico, "and it's indecipherable ... If we, as fathers, don't communicate with them, the impact we're having on them is negligible, much less than maybe other adults in the community."

Eight seconds seems a bit on the low side, but Dr Tim Hawkes, the principal of The King's School, a private boys' school in Sydney's west, says, "Ian is correct. You grunt at them at that stage, your voice drops an octave, your face takes on the cratered appearance of the moon, and the whole world sucks. It's called being an adolescent."

Part of Ian Lillico's solution is his "homework grid", a diagram that contains entries for "taking the dog for a walk" or "going for a walk with your parents".

"When the boy's testosterone surges at about 11 or 12, through to about 14 or 15, he finds it very difficult to talk about his feelings to his father," says Lillico. "There's a natural shut off, but we can't have it shut off completely. There has to be some times when we can actually have [communication]. If that's set by the school, it's got some legitimacy."

"Particularly for males, when you're moving is when you wake up and talk. When you're walking the dog around the block with your son, as part of his homework [grid], he'll start to say, 'Oh, I had a bad time at school today ...' But if you're sitting over the dinner table with your son and eyeballing him, and you say, 'What's wrong?' he'll say, 'Nothing.'"

Other squares in the homework grid might include those for shopping, cooking, playing a game with an adult, and housework.

"When they do housework, they realise their parents aren't their slaves," he says, "and if they don't do it well, it doesn't get signed off by mum and dad. They're developing a work ethic. Also, I'm developing a context where parents can praise their children when they do the right thing – rather than have them in their bedroom for two hours, writing out something that should be done at school – and through praise comes behaviour management and comes the bonding, so it's really an all-encompassing philosophy."

The King's School's Tim Hawkes, who is also the author of a book, *Boy Oh Boy*, and an adviser to the Federal Government on boys' education, does not agree that we should view activities such as making the bed, cutting the grass or helping out with the dishes as being homework.

"Students should not be expecting the Queen's Award for Industry for doing that which a responsible student should be doing

anyway," he says. "I believe there is a place for homework, and indeed, if we should fail to set it, I rather suspect a student's life would not be filled with all these wonderful ideals that have been suggested, and it would probably turn our children even more into couch potatoes, lounge lizards, or items of decoration for the local shopping centre."

The King's School sets homework by year 3 and by year 7 gives students 1½ hours of homework each night. That figure rises to 1½ hours in year 8 and three hours a night by year 12.

Hawkes agrees, however, that some parents do the homework themselves. "Some of them get very upset when they get a B-minus."

St Michael's Grammar, an Anglican private school in St Kilda, is one of only a handful of Australian schools to have adopted wholeheartedly Ian Lillico's ideas. Nobody suggests final-year students should not be set homework, but in years 7 to 9, says principal Simon Gipson, "a great deal of homework is set because there is an expectation that homework *should* be set, not because that work is relevant to what they're doing in class."

"Obviously, as kids progress through school, there's a need to utilise the time they spend outside class to reinforce the things they learn in class, but it's our belief that, in primary school in particular, if the learning is effective within school, there's probably a lot of opportunity outside of school to experience a whole range of other learning."

The school uses Lillico's grid to prompt the children to play Scrabble with their parents, for example.

"There's a whole range of skills they can learn by playing Scrabble," says Gipson. "First, they learn how to spell words they know, secondly, they learn how to invent them – and invent definitions." He laughs. "There are also all the things about negotiating the rules of the game and their expectations of the game itself, but more importantly, there's the opportunity to have social engagement with family members around a board game."

Kevin Donnelly, who taught in schools for 14 years, agrees it is important for families to play Scrabble, go for a walk and play sport, but says, "I believe homework is something kids should do. I'm not saying you do either/or. I'm saying, 'Why not do both?'"

SOMETIMES IT SEEMS THE HOMEWORK debate is hardly concerned with homework at all. It is more about the fears held by people regarding the way society and the family have changed and continue to change. There is a widespread feeling among parents, teachers and academics that the horse has run wild, that it needs to be reined in, but no consensus about the nature of the horse.

Homework reached its current popularity after the Soviet Union shocked the rest of the world by launching the first artificial satellite, Sputnik 1, in the late 1950s. The US and its allies panicked, and the traditional school curriculum was augmented with big doses of science and technology – and a heavier load of

—personal belief

homework – to encourage a new generation of inventors and technicians. The US won the space race, but homework achieved a momentum of its own. The workload grew as the education industry grew. More children stayed longer at school, sat more exams, found more places at more universities. First further education and then higher education opened up to students who previously would have left school in their early teens. Even the least academic children took on an increasing amount of book learning, up to the point where today almost everybody is expected to at least aim to complete year 10.

Many parents and teachers believe one-size homework does not fit all, that some children are cracking under the strain.

"If we fail to set homework, it may turn our children even more into couch potatoes, or items of decoration for the local shopping centre."

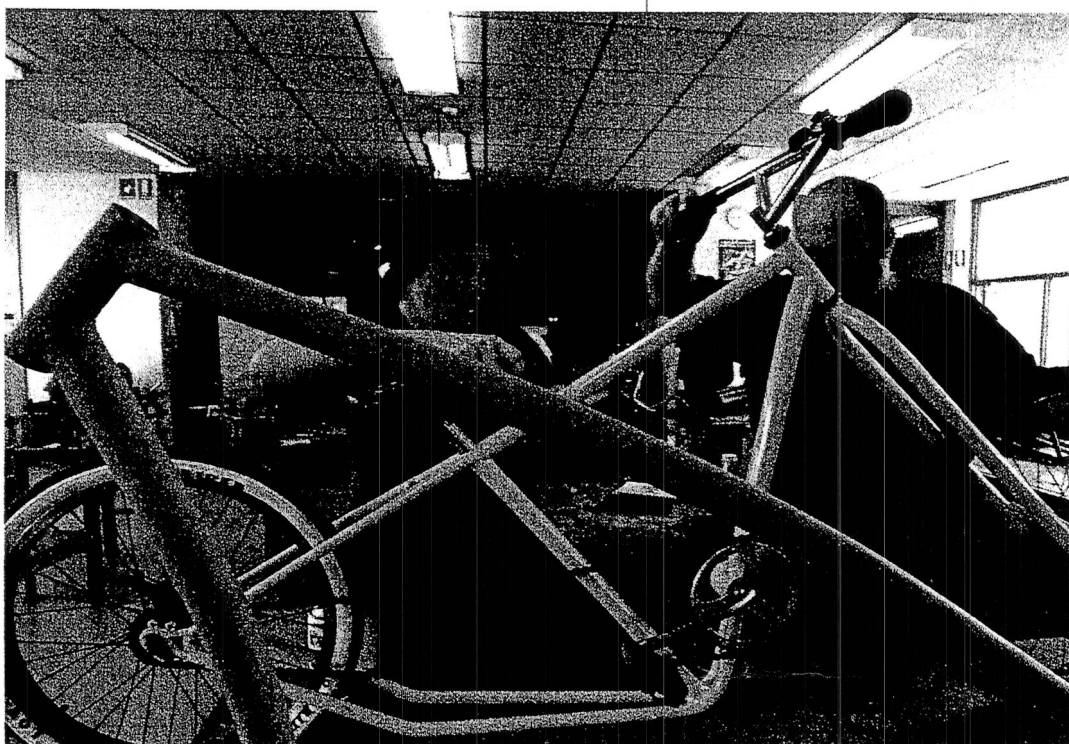
computerisation of trades. If our children are not "knowledge workers", what will they become in a country without industrial jobs?

Coincidental with the decline of industry has been the decline of the nuclear family. Whatever else might have been going on behind closed doors in the 1950s, there was a good chance both birth parents would at least be there.

But in the 1970s and 1980s, after the liberalisation of divorce laws, came a frenzy of separations. Some parents – more particularly, some fathers – vanished from their children's lives. Careers previously closed to women – especially women with children – had their doors forced open by feminism, and there was an explosion in the number of two-career

things. That's a life-skill – organising one's time and making sure that one gets things done."

THE LARGEST NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS THAT come into the NSW P&C and its regional councils are about homework in years 7 and 8. Junior school children often like to pick up a pencil and do a bit of their own work when they get home from school, Brownlee says, whereas "high school truly brings this burden of workload that's unmanageable". The one-on-one relationship the child used to have with her primary schoolteacher has been lost, and often the different subject teachers are unaware exactly what goes on in other classes. "Does the secondary teacher realise that the child has had three, four or five other lots of homework that same day?" asks Brownlee. "Do they understand who this child really is, or their family circumstances? Not at all. "We've heard about children having four or



Learning strategies have to be modified to give them a break.

"Homework for the sake of homework becomes punitive," says Sharryn Brownlee, president of the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW. "It becomes a management tool. We hear that sometimes a lot of homework is set and it's not marked or returned to students for weeks on end. Why was there such a rush to get it all in? What does it all mean?"

THERE IS A CERTAIN, SOMETIMES UNSPOKEN, unease with the scramble for qualifications, the belief among some parents that, to quote Carr-Gregg, "their children are their UAI [University Admissions Index] score, and if they don't get a high UAI score, they will die poor and lonely".

This anxiety is only distantly related to the terrors of rote-learning verbs. It's more about the decline of manufacturing, the mechanisation of agriculture and the

"When they're engaging and learning and they see the relevance in it, kids will turn themselves inside out to find out more and do more": (above left) an informal art class at Eastern Fleurieu School; (right) choppers were among the projects tackled by the year 10 metal fabrication class.

families. Average working hours expanded, too. While some fathers left their homes to go and live with other women, other fathers – and mothers – went to live with their job.

Either way, children lost a degree of contact with their parents. It is the cost of this social anomie, rather than the boredom of memorising multiplication tables, that people like Lillico and Carr-Gregg are trying to defray. Their efforts can sometimes look like social engineering – as if they are forcing families together, dictating the terms of contact.

Lynn Broadway, director of learning at Melbourne Girls Grammar, agrees it would be "ideal if one could sit down and play Scrabble with one's child. I don't get to do that very often, and I think every family has a different way of working in those sorts of experiences, but they're just things to fit around the type of learning that needs to happen.

"Students who are busy often do find ways of fitting in the things they have to do among the music practices and all sorts of other

five hours of homework in year 7 and year 8. It's unbelievable: 'Do an hour's reading on your book'; 'Those maths problems will only take you about 45 minutes', which turns into an hour; somebody's got ancient history – you might have had three days to do it but you were at a family function the night before ...

"People say that homework gets them into a good pattern for studying when they're older, it gives them responsibility for learning, but you've got to be careful you don't turn them off. There's plenty of time to get those study habits in place when things are important to them. When they're engaging and learning and they see the relevance in it, kids will turn themselves inside out to find out more and do more."

Brownlee also believes students should have more input into the homework they are set, a view shared by many liberal educationalists.

Donnelly, on the other hand, champions unfashionable rote learning. "I'm all in favour of it," he says. "In fact, we don't do enough,

The school with no homework

● There is one school that has gone even further than Ian Lillico (see main text) suggests. Eastern Fleurieu, in the Adelaide Hills, is in the process of abolishing homework until year 10.

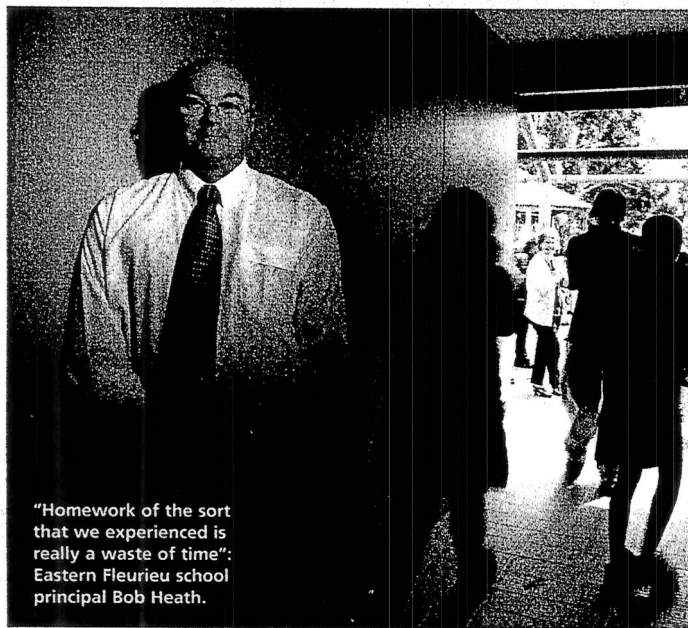
Principal Bob Heath is a largish, generous man, wearing a little more chunky jewellery than the average principal. He has also mastered the headmaster's art of appearing 10 centimetres taller than he actually is, as he strides around his huge school. Eastern Fleurieu, a reception-to-year-12 school, has seven campuses spread over 100 square kilometres and draws students from an even wider area. Among its 1200 pupils, there are 20 Aborigines and only one child from a non-English-speaking background.

Heath has been a teacher for 23 years, and a principal for 11, and his

to free them for sport and music, or to do the washing-up with their parents. Most were able to finish their assignments in class time but some kids "who would work underwater" continued to do research at home.

"At the end of that term, every child in the group had achieved either equal to or at a higher level than before," Heath says. "Everyone had completed the work that was required."

Notes Lyndell Davidge, one of the teachers who pioneered the policy: "We didn't tell the parents we weren't going to do any homework; we just didn't do it. At the parent-teacher interviews, after the reports went home after the first term, 50 per cent of the parents said, 'I'm really concerned that they don't seem to have any homework.' We said, 'That's because there isn't any.'



"Homework of the sort that we experienced is really a waste of time": Eastern Fleurieu school principal Bob Heath.

philosophy is based on a "recognition that homework of the sort that we experienced is really a waste of time.

"You used to have your diary ... [with] four subjects written down there, and you'd have to write in what it was you did, and there was a column for 'time', and you weren't allowed to put less than 40 minutes next to a subject, so you put down 45 minutes or whatever.

"If a child in maths is doing 20 problems, and the homework given was 'finish the 20' [from class], the bright kids don't have anything to finish.

"The kids who were like me, who would talk to their mates, would have five or six to knock off in the evening; but the kids who were struggling couldn't do them when the teacher was there, so they'd be given something to do at home that they can't do at school anyway."

Three years ago, the school ran a no-homework trial with a combined year 7/8 class. The class was given a work program, but when the kids did the work was up to them. The idea was

encouraged to read to their parents every night. If they're learning the rules of soccer in PE, they are told to watch the game on TV with their parents, and explain why the referee blows his whistle.

"We've got a large number of students who are becoming socially isolated," says Heath. "This is a very sporting-type town, but there's a decline in involvement in sport, the clubs are struggling to find players. A lot of that is a consequence of kids having internet access and PlayStations."

He sees the rise of a dislocated generation that finds it difficult to form relationships. "The computer age is building a group of kids who are exceptionally computer-literate," he says, "but I don't know if they're socially adequate."

Lyndell Davidge gathers a group of year 8 pupils in a classroom to talk about the way the no-homework policy affects their lives. They are all bright, articulate students, and they are volunteers, so they are all girls. After school, they each do about four hours a week of sport, music, drama or dance, and go to bed between 9pm and 9.30pm.

"Without the homework, we can actually do more around the house, and more out-of-school activities," says one girl, Ashlea.

But does she really?

"I'm more likely to do the dishes and cooking," she says.

Does she enjoy that?

"I enjoy the cooking. Not the dishes." Do her parents appreciate it?

"Yeah," she says. "I get extra pocket money for doing more housework."

Chantelle says without homework she can spend more time "with my family and our pets - a dog, a budgie and a guinea pig".

Does she do the dishes?

"We have a dishwasher."

Kayla says she does "whatever my parents need me to do, like dishes or walking the dog. I do the dishes without being asked, and that gives me more pocket money."

Timisa does take schoolwork home to finish. "But I can do it at my own pace," she says, "and when I feel like it. I get more family time. Time just to hang about and [she smiles] ... bond."

Their parents seem equally enthusiastic. They say their children are more relaxed, and they do not just spend the extra time watching TV.

"We've been extremely happy with how it's all worked out," says Kaiinda Freschi, who has one daughter in year 8 and another in year 11. The youngest "has been a very happy child. I can't see the issue with those grades not having homework."

Was she sceptical at first?

"No," she says, "because I actually felt there had been too much pressure put on the kids when they were younger." ■

especially in primary school. When my kids did the clarinet and the violin, they actually had to just sit there and learn the notes, and repeat them, day after day.

"There's no magical way of learning how to play the clarinet. A lot of it is repetition, and a lot of it is just sitting and focusing and concentrating. Similarly, I've got no problems with kids being made to recite poetry, or a ballad that they actually have to sit down and memorise."

Ian Lillico says rote learning was useful when exams were about regurgitating facts, but these days they are about mastering processes and skills. "We used to have to learn the capital cities of all the countries in the world. That's ridiculous stuff. You can access that from your mobile phone if you particularly need it."

Counters Donnelly: "My view is that you've got a very good computer, and it's sitting on your shoulders. In lower primary school, I'd throw out the calculators, and I'd be getting them to do a lot more mental arithmetic, which is really memorising times tables and being able to churn them out.

"You don't learn that by accident. You have to actually be made to do it. Learning multiplication is difficult. It requires effort and concentration. It's not like MTV soundbites."

Donnelly says research in developmental psychology shows children need foundation learning. "A lot of lower-order stuff, your times tables or the prime ministers of Australia, you've really got to learn it by heart," he says.

"And that hard-wires your brain like a computer, and frees all the energy to do the higher-order stuff."

To those like Michael Carr-Gregg who claim there is no educational benefit in homework, Donnelly quotes the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS), which looks at primary and secondary school performance across those subjects in Europe, Asia and Australasia: "The amount of homework, as recorded by students, that students did each day, was positively related to achievement."

DONNELLY CONCEDES THAT THE HIDDEN hand of a parent often leaves its fingerprints on project-based homework. He believes that is not an argument against setting homework, but simply something teachers should watch out for when they are marking.

He says teachers should confront parental plagiarism using what he calls "the 'T' word" - testing. "If you test it and the kid fails, then you know that he hasn't learned it," says Donnelly, in which case the child probably has not done the work.

"Then again," he adds, "modern education does not like to fail kids, and it doesn't like testing either. Whereas I do."

Surely it is time somebody took a stand for the mums and dad - the exploited, exhausted parents who are now under suspicion, as well. Lip-service to "lifelong learning" was not supposed to condemn them to continually reliving their own schooldays, tirelessly forging projects about Federation and the Dreamtime.

Parents need time to simply enjoy being adults: to play bridge, to tinker in the shed, to watch *The Bill*, and to have sex with each other. After all, they are only old once. ■